

How to Get Kids to Play Outdoors

Why kids are spending so much time indoors, how it hurts them — and what to do about it
By Meagan Francis

When I was 10, the age my oldest son is now, I raced outside nearly every summer morning. All the neighborhood kids left their houses right after breakfast, eager for another day of exploring streets and trails, climbing trees, or hunting for fuzzy caterpillars on the leaves of bushes and shrubs. We barely set foot inside until dusk, when we finally trooped home, filthy, scabby-kneed, and exhilarated. As I cuddled with my mother on the sofa after a long day of play, she'd inhale deeply and sigh, "Mmm, you smell like sunshine."

I wish my four kids smelled like sunshine, but if indoors had a smell (computer-screen cleaning fluid? plastic DVD cases?), I'm afraid that would be their signature scent. Staying inside is definitely their default, and sadly, that seems to be the new norm for most kids. In America today, a child is about three times more likely to play video games regularly than to ride a bike, a comparison of studies suggests; the National Sporting Goods Association reports a 33.2 percent drop in bicycling between 1996 and 2006. Even getting to school doesn't get kids outside: In 1969, 87 percent of kids ages 6 to 17 who lived within a mile of school walked or biked there. By 2004, the figure had dropped to 48 percent (of children 9 to 15). "Kids aren't going out the front door much anymore, let alone into natural settings," says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* and chairman of the Children & Nature Network. He's quick to add that "nature" doesn't have to mean a forest preserve, just any outdoor area that's not too manicured. "A soccer field is not nature, but the edge of the soccer field, where it gets rough and you see weeds and rocks, is," he says. "Digging a hole and finding life, getting physically engaged with the world — that's nature."

Several studies have shown that regular, unstructured playtime in nature makes kids smarter, calmer, more self-disciplined, more cooperative, and happier. As a child, I loved going outdoors for its own sake, but looking back, I value the gifts it gave me: a strong, healthy body; an up-close-and-personal relationship with the birds and bugs and plants of northern Michigan; a resilience borne of the many scraped shins and bike crashes I never let slow me down; and the joy of knowing that every day held adventure and excitement right outside my front door.

So what's keeping our kids indoors? Read on for a rundown of the attitudes, both ours and theirs, most likely to prevent them from heading for the backyard — and parent-tested ways to overcome them.

Barrier: "It's not safe!"

Parents have been so inundated with dire media warnings about child abductions and pedestrian accidents that many think going outside is too dangerous for their preteens. "There are things outside that can be risky, but keeping kids under house arrest has risks, too," Louv says. For example, the CDC reports that about one in three American children are now overweight or at risk for becoming so, increasing their chances of developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. While we should undoubtedly be aware of the potential — but usually rare — hazards of letting kids play outside, we also need to pay attention to the much more prevalent dangers of not letting them play outside.

The Solutions

Establish ground rules. Set clear limits so your kids know what's safe. My two older sons, for instance, can play in any front yard on our block, but they aren't allowed to enter anyone's house or backyard without letting me know first. Before they go out, we agree on where they're going and when they'll be back, and we set up a check-in call. The rules you make will depend upon factors such as your child's age and maturity, your neighborhood's safety, and the availability of siblings or friends for your kid to buddy up with. My younger son, who's 4, is permitted to go out in the fenced backyard or into the front yard if his big brothers are with him. But my 2 1/2-year-old, whom I've affectionately dubbed "the bolter," must remain within locked gates at all times.

Enlist a village. When you wandered through the neighborhood as a kid, chances are that your friends' moms were keeping an eye on you as well as on their own brood. Join with other local parents to look out for one another's kids, and keep in touch by phone or text-message about where the gang is going and what they're up to. You'll gain several extra sets of watchful eyes, but the kids will still be able to enjoy a sense of freedom. Better yet, plan regular hangout times when parents get together, sit outside on lawn chairs, and chat while the kids run around, suggests Mike Lanza, 45, father of two and founder of playborhood.com, an online community dedicated to promoting unstructured neighborhood play.